

Feral animals

Principle:

Feral animals are an economic and food resource for the region. Large, uncontrolled numbers, however, have the potential to cause significant natural resource degradation.

Introduced fauna species in the region have been identified as mammals (black rat, water buffalo, cattle, pig, horse, cat), reptiles (gecko, flowerpot blind snake) and six species of ants (Woinarski *et al.* 2003b). Of these, pigs, cats and big-headed ants are considered as significant threats to natural resource values. Water buffalo and pigs are considered high value food to Tiwi people, and are also valued for their contribution to tourism through trophy hunting, and their confirmed disease free status. Concentrations of buffalo occur in remote areas of south and east Melville Island, and anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be some detrimental impacts to wetland communities. There are no reports of buffalo on Bathurst Island.

Feral pigs have historically been confined to Bathurst Island, where there is considerable evidence of widespread degradation associated with their presence. The first confirmed sighting and capture of a feral pig on Melville Island occurred during 2003, and evidence suggests that they are confined to a discrete coastal wetland on the north-west coast. The Tiwi Land Council is currently investigating options for eradication in this area, and commenced a control programme in partnership with the Parks and Wildlife Service in October 2003.

Tiwi residents are aware of the damage pigs cause to natural systems, and are concerned about their potential impact if they proliferate through the wetlands on Melville Island. It is a Tiwi Land Council policy that any pigs kept as pets on Melville Island must be de-sexed, and intact pigs cannot be released on the Island.

Concern about feral cats is raised as an issue from time to time, and although there is no information on total numbers in the region, sightings are often reported during hunting and recreational activities. Eradication of feral cats has been reported by Environment Australia (1999) as a continuing requirement with significant costs involved, and, due to the difficulties involved, should

be concentrated in areas critical to threatened species conservation. The Tiwi Land Council has instigated a policy that no cats can be transported to the Islands unless they have been de-sexed, and permission must be sought before any cats are taken into the region.

The African big-headed ant, *Pheidole megacephala* has been recorded at Nguuu on Bathurst Island, and Pirlangimpi, Milikapiti and Takamprimili on Melville Island. According to Andersen *et al.* (2003), it is one of the world's worst invasive ant species, and has had a major ecological impact in at least one rainforest patch near Darwin. Surveys on the Islands during 2000 and 2001 indicated that it had not spread out from the main communities.

The yellow crazy ant, *Anoplolepis gracilipes* is also known for its high impact on rainforests and, although it has not been recorded from the Tiwi Islands, is considered at high risk of being introduced.

The Tiwi Land Council in partnership with CSIRO has commenced an exotic ant survey and eradication programme on the Islands, and current advice is that the likelihood of eradication is high. The new washdown bay facility at Tiwi Barge Services on the mainland has also been designed for ant exclusion, which will significantly lower the risk of re-infestation.



Outcome:

Protection of the region's economic and natural resource values from the impacts of feral animals.

Objective:

14 Develop and implement prioritised feral animal management strategies.

Recommended Actions:

- 14.1 Develop and implement a feral pig eradication programme for Rangini (Melville Island).
- 14.2 Assess and record the extent of degradation from feral pigs and buffalo.
- 14.3 Investigate options for pig and cat control in priority areas under Commonwealth Government species recovery plans and threat abatement plans.
- 14.4 Investigate and encourage economic opportunities for the utilisation of buffalo and pigs.
- 14.5 Carry out a prioritised feral ant eradication programme.
- 14.6 Develop and enforce policies and by-laws specific for regional feral animal issues, including complimentary education and awareness programmes.

